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IS AN HONEST AND SANE NEWSPAPER PRESS POSSIBLE?

BY AN INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST

Chicago, Ill.

It was once declared to be impossible to indict a nation. Nations have often been indicted sweepingly and scathingly—for example, the British by Matthew Arnold, Kipling, and Wells; the Americans by the editors and contributors of the *London Academy* and the *Saturday Review*—but these attempts have but emphasized the “impossibility” of the process. Such indictments are unfair, idle, and superficial. No one takes them seriously, not even the passionate framers of them.

It is equally “impossible” to indict the newspaper press of any country. The American newspaper has, indeed, been indicted often enough, even by men who really know the newspaper “from the inside.” But the Socratic method would force these accusers to make so many admissions of a character favorable to American journalism—to pay it so many compliments—that precious little would be left of their wholesale charges of deterioration, mendacity, venality, recklessness, sensationalism, etc.

The truth, of course, is that the American newspaper of today has serious vices, faults, shortcomings, as well as great virtues; that it has gained in some directions, improved some of its work, and lost in other directions. The same newspaper arouses your enthusiasm at one time, so that you write, or are tempted to write, to the editor warmly thanking him for his noble efforts, and provokes your anger and disgust at another time, so that you are ready to denounce it at the breakfast table as a poisoner of the public mind and an enemy of decency and truth.

However, it is hardly necessary in this day and generation to dwell on the power of the press, the value of the publicity it secures, the inestimable services it renders to all movements for political and social reform. What league, organization, settlement, improvement club would dispense with newspaper aid?

How much would the progressive forces in national, state, and municipal life have accomplished without such aid? If there is a healthy change in the tone of public and press comment on needless strikes, on refusals to arbitrate, on Bourbonism in employers, on improper practices in elections, on what was not many years ago regarded as "legitimate graft"—if public opinion has "marched" and public standards have been elevated—cannot the daily press justly claim much of the credit of this progress?

Such questions not only answer themselves, but the actions of all thoughtful and progressive men, to repeat, answer them conclusively.

Yet, even in their most philosophical moods, intelligent men deplore the evils of the modern "great" newspapers. The question is really this: Being so potent, so educational, so stimulating, so *civilizing*, as they are, is it impossible for the newspapers to rid themselves of the vices which prevent them from wielding even greater power for good, intellectually and morally?

It has been said that only generous endowment could "emancipate" a great newspaper and enable it to be true to its highest ideals—to be honest in all things, to tell the truth boldly, to eschew sensationalism and vulgarity. And wealthy philanthropists have been urged to establish an "exemplary," a model newspaper, just as model libraries, model tenements, model orchestras are established by endowment. Cannot, then, the ordinary commercial newspaper rise to and maintain itself on the highest plane.

Let us see what ails the average "big" commercial newspaper. I say "big," for no one who is familiar with the American daily press will deny that we have a number of local or small newspapers that are as excellent as human institutions can be. That is, there are newspapers that publish only news fit to print; that never deliberately falsify or misrepresent; that have convictions and the courage to apply them to the events, issues, and personalities of the day; that employ competent and self-respecting reporters and correspondents and, consequently, are well written from first page to last, and that are read by educated persons with pleasure and profit.

There are such newspapers, and they are reasonably prosperous, though there are no "millions in them." Cannot the big newspapers, those of national or wide circulation and prestige, be equally clean, sensible, and upright?

It is reported in newspaper circles that the publisher and editor of one of the biggest New York papers regards one of the smaller local papers as his ideal of what a daily newspaper should be, and that when he was asked why he did not practice the virtues so admired in his own organ, he replied: "I do not care to address a select committee; I wish to speak to the nation." The clear implication is that to gain and hold a nation's attention an editor must offend his own reason and conscience! But exactly what concessions, and how many of them, are essential to popularity? Granting that to attract tens of thousands of readers means giving them what they like and enjoy, the question is, what does the great public want?

One of the vices of the big newspapers—at least of the majority of them—is what is called "faking." Does the public demand fabrication, misrepresentation for the sake of effect, sensationalism in the news columns? The public does prefer the dramatic, the picturesque, the romantic, the extraordinary (and this fact has even been pressed into a defense of the extreme kinds of "yellow journalism"), but, surely, it is not a mere phrase that truth is stranger than fiction. This world of ours is anything but dull or prosaic; what with Persian and Turkish revolutions, counter-revolutions, and second revolutions; what with Morocco, Spain, the British budget, the German and Austrian diplomatic coups; what with earthquakes, conquests of the air, North Pole discoveries—assuredly the newspapers have not, of late, been driven to manufacture news or color and spice their material! And what is true of any period is, in reality, true of all periods. There is never a dearth of dramatic and interesting news, of material for readable and stimulating issues.

"Faking" assumes many forms, and while not all of them are base and profoundly immoral, all of them are offensive and inexcusable. A little honesty, with a little intelligence in the heads of departments and in the reporters or special writers, would

render it wholly unnecessary. Take two recent instances. Was it not as absurd as it was outrageous to put into Professor Palmer's mouth a general plea for flirting and the teaching of flirting in women's colleges? The incident which he actually reported in his address, and his own version of it, would have served every legitimate journalistic need of "comic relief," of humor and playfulness. A venerable Harvard professor, a teacher of morals, had advised a college girl to "flirt hard" in order to convince her fond and uneasy parents that too much learning had not made her awkward, shy, alien to the bright world of "society"! There was absolutely no "occasion" for exaggeration and falsification, even from the viewpoint of a reporter not overburdened with honesty and virtue. Again, was it not gratuitous to misrepresent Dr. Eliot's views as to the religion of the future? An intelligent summary of his address would have afforded plenty of food for lively comment. Was it not simply idiotic to fasten on him the parentage of a "new religion," and one hostile to what is essential in Christianity to boot? Had the city editors "assigned" to the job reporters of some education and sense, their "stories" would have been quite sufficiently interesting to thousands of readers, without a bit of sensationalism or perversion.

Take the minor forms of faking—the padding of news when the cables or dispatches happen to be too brief; the eager exploitation of silly and ignorant reports of lectures of college professors on scientific, literary, or ethical subjects; the "doctoring" of reports in such a way as to convert rumor into alleged fact, tentative project into settled and imminent enterprise. Do such things lend a newspaper strength, interest, freshness, newsmanship? Would they be missed if in their place the editors and writers furnished truthful items and bits of real science and real life? If the public is interested in astronomy, chemistry, biology, religious philosophy, the current literature and discussion of these subjects will provide an abundance of available matter. For yellow astronomy, yellow biology, yellow chemistry there is not the slightest need from a journalistic point of view. It cannot be pleasant to editors and publishers to see university after university establish a censorship over news; to see an astronomical convention prepare a list

of "fakes" and warn readers against attaching the slightest importance to newspaper stories about them.

But to come to a more serious newspaper vice—one of which public-spirited men and women complain most bitterly—the dishonest treatment of political, industrial, social, and other "contentious" subjects in the news columns. A newspaper is entitled to its opinions and to its own interpretation of facts. But the public is, above all, entitled to the facts—to the truth. It has practically no other source of information; it depends almost entirely on the press for knowledge of the facts, whether the question be one of national, state, or municipal politics, educational, industrial, or moral import. We hear much about the influence of public opinion, the rights and interests of the community, the impartiality and soundness of the public judgment in any case which has received full discussion. It is perfectly true that there is no higher and juster court than enlightened public opinion, and no better government than government by discussion. But public opinion cannot become enlightened and discussion cannot be profitable where the press perverts, distorts, suppresses, juggles with the facts. And there are times and occasions—campaigns, strikes, prosecutions—when the newspapers, far from working, directly or indirectly, for righteousness, for sanity, for substantial justice, seem to be desperately striving to darken counsel and make confusion worse confounded. Miss Jane Addams once deplored the "disappearance of the 'third party'"—the public—in connection with a particularly tangled labor dispute that seemed to resist all attempts at compromise, and she was forced to lay much of the blame for the dangerous situation at the door of the local newspapers. They would not and could not give the facts; they would not and could not guide the public to reasonable conclusions. At such times the "publicity" of the newspapers is worse than useless; it is positively harmful. It adds fuel to the flame; it intensifies prejudice, passion, misunderstanding.

In England a clever writer has said that what the "legitimate" is to the lurid and crude melodrama, the news section of the great papers is to the editorial page. In the reports, in other words,

the reader gets facts—what men said and did—while in the editorials he gets exaggeration, misconstruction, malice, violent rhetoric. Alas! in the case of many American papers it cannot truthfully be said that the news columns exhibit any tendency to the “legitimate.” Whatever the question may be—direct primaries, graft, municipal charters, corporate franchises, what not—the news columns are as melodramatic as the editorials. We have portraits of villains and of saints; we find incorruptible virtue battling with brazen knavery and low cunning. The correspondents and reporters are expected, encouraged, instructed to “editorialize,” to pass judgment, to draw freely on their imagination, mind-reading powers, vocabulary of invective and laudation. Indeed, the distinction between news and editorials has ceased to possess any meaning for most of the newspapers, not excepting those who call themselves “independent.”

Now, nothing is more vicious and at the same time more utterly gratuitous and inefficient than this destruction of the news value of the so-called “news columns.” Let the editor say what he pleases in the proper place; let the correspondent or reporter give his personal impression of the atmosphere of a fight or situation; but, first and last, let the reporter *report*. What did this man say in his speech or interview? What did that man do on a certain occasion, and what was his own explanation of the act? Denounce, scoff, sneer, moralize, exhort—but let all this be separated from the “news.” Readers would deeply appreciate this and pay more attention to the editor’s opinions, for his scrupulous handling of the facts would inspire confidence in his sincerity. Thus, alike from the viewpoint of newspaper *influence* and from that of proper discharge of the primary function of a modern paper, the result of the separation would be vastly increased efficiency.

This naturally brings me to the vices of the editorial page. There are those who hold that the editorial page has steadily deteriorated and—largely for that reason—lost its authority and importance. “Who reads editorials?” it is cynically asked, even in the western storm-centers of political and social agitation. And it is pointed out that editors themselves tacitly recognize

the decline and weakness of their personal "corner" in a variety of ways—by constantly limiting the space for editorial comment, by demanding brevity, lightness, and flippancy of their editorial writers, and by their general indifference to the character and reputation of the page. That some newspapers have deliberately weakened their editorial pages must be admitted, but even in their case, in all probability, the step will lead to no other in the same direction. Their example has not been followed; the best and most influential newspapers have yielded to no alleged "new tendency," for they still regard interpretation and comment as their noblest duty and most precious privilege. Besides, where the whole paper editorializes, where every item is colored, there is little need and little opportunity for a strong editorial page. It merely spells repetition and pale reflection of the "freer" and more colloquial style of the correspondents and reporters. It should be borne in mind, too, that the more comprehensive and able the news sections are the less need there is for "quantity" in editorials. There is no particular reason why the purposes served by the "information" editorial, the "light" editorial, the "humorous" editorial should not be served by dispatches and articles of a news character. Has the quality of the editorial section suffered deterioration?

Undoubtedly, at least in many cases. The counting-room is too close to the sanctum; there is too much fear of the big advertiser, too much dread of "making enemies," too much thought of circulation and the danger of offending this or that element. These motives beget sins of commission as well as of omission. Editors pass over subjects they would like to discuss because they anticipate criticism, complaint, withdrawal of patronage. On the other hand, they occasionally express opinions that are not theirs at all, but the known or supposed opinions of certain interests whose good will is desirable if not essential. Add to this that there are newspapers which serve as the special organs of special interests, of plutocracy, privilege, and monopoly, —newspapers which are not even expected to yield large profits, or any profits at all, since they are mere adjuncts to speculation, frenzied finance, or grasping, quasi-legal enterprises. From such

newspapers no honest discussion or honest treatment of news can be hoped for. This is incidentally and significantly admitted by so conservative a statesman as Lord Hugh Cecil, the son of the late Marquis of Salisbury, the British Tory leader, in a recent article on the decline of parliamentary debating. Lord Hugh Cecil argues for free and full discussion in the House of Commons, and here is one of his reasons:

I am quite clear that, if deliberation, in the true sense of the word, does not take place in the House of Commons, it will take place nowhere. Deliberation in the country is not a reality in the sense that it is a reality in an assembly. In the country it is chiefly conducted by the press, who are largely the exponents of wealthy interests. We are but at the beginning of a development in that direction, which is sure to go farther. The press will speak the mind of a certain number of wealthy people who can start or buy newspapers with a political object in view.

The situation in the United States with reference to the control of the press by wealthy interests is not so serious as it is in England, but the various tendencies in the direction of such control are not to be overlooked. At any rate, the influence of the powerful advertisers is thoroughly pernicious. There are advertisers who do not hesitate to demand either silence or positive championship of their "side" of a question. There are theatrical managers who will not tolerate adverse criticisms of their "productions" in a certain style or manner, and who actually dictate dismissals of writers. There are brewers who "drop" newspapers for what they consider excessive devotion to prohibition or law and decency. There are corporations that will not give any "business" to papers that are fair and impartial in their treatment of labor unions, of strikes, of injunctions. There are dairy interests that will promptly visit their displeasure on editors who can see no justice in a high tax on oleomargarine that is honestly labeled and sold for what it is. There are public-utility companies that will not suffer advocacy of municipal or state ownership. Boycotts of newspapers by department stores, by theaters, by the liquor trade are not unknown, but the instances that reach the public form a very small proportion of the instances of quiet pressure, hints and words to the wise, "object lessons," etc.

To say that editors ought to be bold, honest, candid is to utter a platitude. Few yield willingly to commercial considerations; few derive pleasure from hypocrisy or self-stultification or self-subordination. The fundamental trouble is that too many newspapers are actually at the mercy of advertisers. The price paid by the reader is absurdly low—and yet some publishers, strangely enough, actually boast of the fact that this price “does not cover the cost of the paper.”¹ The advertisers too often feel that they are really “subsidizing” certain newspapers—that they are not getting the full worth of their money in returns—and, of course, subsidizers have rights. These rights are tacitly recognized, and the recognition may be reinforced by the perfectly sincere reflection that a newspaper may yield here and there for the sake of the larger services to society and progress it is capable of rendering. If all life is compromise, why should not newspapers compromise?

Making, however, full allowance for this aspect of the case, it remains true that newspapers are not as independent, as consistent, as courageous as they might be. They are silent when a mild, reasonable tone might disarm prejudice; they are gratuitously aggressive on what they know to be the wrong side when a tactful and gentle espousal of the right would do them little or no harm with the most arrogant.

The question of complete editorial independence is a very delicate one, and it is not a theory but a condition that confronts

¹ Since this was written the *New York Tribune*, the leading Republican organ in the country, and in many respects an admirable and superior newspaper, has reduced its price from three cents a copy to one cent. It promises fully to maintain its high standards, but the *Springfield (Mass.) Republican*, one of the most creditable and truly independent newspapers, rightly calls the action “a desperate” one and proceeds to comment thereon as follows: “The Tribune’s step does, however, undoubtedly illustrate a tendency of American newspapers to seek their support entirely from advertising, a course which is certainly of doubtful advantage to the readers, and even the advertisers. The big modern daily is an exceedingly costly product. When it is sold for one cent at retail the revenue from sales is hardly sufficient to pay for the paper on which it is printed. It follows, of course, that the advertisers must pay all of the other enormous expenses of production. The effect upon the character of the paper, in most cases, is obviously not of the right sort, from the standpoint of the public good.”

us in dealing with it. The situation would be infinitely healthier if readers had been "brought up" on the right principle of paying for value received, as they do in the case of other comforts and luxuries. That men otherwise liberal and extravagant should insist on getting a 3-cent paper for 1 cent, or a 5-cent paper for 2 cents is a phenomenon that would puzzle a visitor from Mars, where, we must hope, newspapers command a "living price." Meantime it is clear that the emancipation of the editorial page would be powerfully furthered by the above-suggested de-editorializing of the news columns. Give everyone a hearing; set forth the facts as they are, and few will be audacious enough to complain of an honest and judicial expression of opinion in the editorial section.

Still another newspaper vice which disgusts readers of sense and right feeling is noisy self-laudation and self-advertisement. A self-respecting newspaper is entitled to credit for real leadership, for help in good causes, for honest service, and there is nothing wrong in an occasional and relevant reminder of past service or in an expression of legitimate satisfaction with one's record. But there are newspapers—happily this number is diminishing—which wildly magnify small or even imaginary achievements, which increasingly boast of their power and greatness, which initiate nine-day "crusades" in order to create talk about themselves among the superficial, which misrepresent situations for the sake of cheap originality. Such newspapers do not in the least care which side they fight on; all they seek is notoriety and revenue. They may at times appear to be working for righteousness, but their influence is pernicious on the whole. They delight in confusion and would create Bedlam all around them. Real progress is the result of honest and efficient service, and crazy sensationalism only hinders and demoralizes.

A few words now as to sanity and efficiency in the handling of matter generally. The yellow newspapers have had a terribly demoralizing effect on the presentation of news and its display. Editors have a horror of "dryness," or the appearance of it, and everything—style, grammar, sobriety, economy—is sacrificed to *liveliness*. Can it be supposed that readers are attracted

by crazy, silly, and grotesque headlines, by headlines that bear no relation to the text, by ridiculous misuse of words? Let some one criticize a remark of any sort, and the headline announces that so-and-so "flays" or "scores" so-and-so. Let some one do a very ordinary thing, and he is described as having delivered "a crushing blow" at this or that person or enterprise. What has been called the catastrophic "style" is painfully over-worked by the headline builders.

This vice is by no means limited in journalism to headline writers. Reporters, special writers, reviewers, and critics are also addicted to it. The straining after striking, picturesque, impressive language defeats its own purpose, and when trivial things are treated in a "grand" style, the effect is doubly pernicious. The attempt is ludicrous, and there is no style left for the things that invite or impose "pomp and circumstance," rhetorically speaking. Who has not felt the hollowness and inefficiency of much of our newspaper literary and dramatic criticism? To read the adjectives and adverbs so lavishly bestowed on current fiction, for example, would mean to infer (if one did not *know* better) that at least a dozen masterpieces are produced every month. The insight into character, the art, the humor, the vitality, the breadth, the originality which are attributed to scores of contemporary authors would provide ample literary equipment for a whole group of Scotts, Thackerays, Balzacs, Tolstoys! Yet the reviewers themselves, characteristically contemptuous of their own extravagant praise, assert several times a year that the average contemporary novel is a poor, crude, commercial affair; that there is a lamentable over-production of novels, and that few of these are remembered or read six months after their appearance! How can one reconcile the generosity, the optimism, the enthusiasm of the separate notices with the censoriousness, the gloom, the pessimism of annual and semi-annual "surveys?" No reconciliation is possible; the reviewers maintain a double standard and their left hand knows not what their right hand is doing.

Inefficiency is also constantly exhibited in "splurges" and needless repetitions. The reader may indeed be profoundly interested in a certain event—a discovery, a court decision, a piece of

legislation—and he may have the time and disposition to wade through several columns—or even, in rare cases—pages of matter; but he has no time or energy to waste on mere verbiage, on repetition, on chatter that adds nothing to the facts or the speculation of the case. To let correspondents drool; to fill space with empty interviews; to say a thing three times over, is not “to give the public what it wants.” Whatever we may choose to blame the public for in the shortcomings of the great newspaper, there is not the least ground for debiting it with a preference for dull verbiage, for inflated egotism in correspondents, for the multiplication of words. The notion of some publishers or editors that a paper without bedlamite headlines, without inane and empty “dispatches,” with excruciating and misdirected “humor” would lose circulation is devoid of all foundation in experience.

I have said nothing so far of the yellow variety of newspapers, first because it is too easy to assail them, and, second, because there are not many of them to corrupt the public taste and mind. The real danger is from the yellow streaks and the yellow practices of the respectable and “white” newspapers. If they were to mend their ways, to practice what they so virtuously preach, the yellow press could be dismissed as a negligible quantity. Its most flagrant abuses would tend to cure themselves; its own readers would weary of hysteria, of clamor, of scandal, and of imbecility. There is no “Gresham law” in journalism; the good do not find the competition of the bad fatal to their survival or prosperity. The “good” have not had sufficient faith in the virtues they have affected; they have lacked courage and persistence; they have distrusted the public.

Sane and honest journalism is possible—possible here and now—simply because there is nothing utopian about the standards dictated by sanity and honesty. There is no objection to stalwart partisanship when it is genuine and honest. There is no objection to publicity within reasonable limits. There is no irrational squeamishness. The qualities and practices to which objection is offered, and which cause certain “superior” persons to plume themselves—as, for example, Mr. Balfour, the Tory leader in Great Britain, is represented as doing—on boycotting the

newspapers are repugnant to elementary sense and elementary propriety. There is no risk in renouncing them—none whatever.

But what of the advertising columns? Can they be overhauled, cleansed, and purified without loss and risk?

There are newspapers that are passionately denouncing gambling in all its higher and lower forms (including the mining and stock-exchange varieties) in their editorial columns, that are calling loudly for rigorous legislation against demoralizing speculation while maintaining an open door, or several open doors and windows, for the benefit of all stock gamblers and get-rich-quick sharks. These are "moral" newspapers that publish quack advertisements and serve as media of vice and filth. Is it too much to ask them to sacrifice the revenue from such sources as these? Can the plea be entertained that "business is business," or that a newspaper office is not a moral censorship? Assuredly not. Fraud and vice in advertising should be put in the same category with pandering, swindling, obtaining money under false pretenses. White-slave traffickers might as well plead that *they* "must live"! Society prescribes a moral level, and there is no operating below it. Newspapers, like builders of tenements, like money-lenders, must manage to "live" without fostering or breeding immorality and dishonesty. That they occasionally "expose" or condemn in their editorials the very things which they encourage by advertising, scarcely mitigates the offense. A pickpocket might consent to preach respect for property and law once a week, but we should not give him a license on those terms.

I said above that no risks or sacrifices are involved in a policy of honesty and sanity for our newspapers, great or small. The assertion needs but one qualification—there would be no *permanent* sacrifice. Temporary loss there might be in a given case, as in rejecting improper advertisements, or in losing the patronage of an industrial Bourbon and arrogant plutocrat. But in the end independence, intelligence, reasonable courage, integrity, and efficiency bring their reward in journalism as in everything else. The investment pays. And editors who are so ready to trust public opinion in political and industrial controversies should be

willing to trust it with regard to recognition of merit in journalism.

Indeed, "trust the public" might be recommended as a good substitute for the motto that has so many sins to answer for, "Give the public what it wants." Credit the public with sanity and fairness, and the offensive characteristics of journalism will be wholly deprived of their alleged warrant. Instruct reporters and correspondents and copy-readers to bear in mind that they are addressing rational and reputable men and women, and a premium will be put on veracity, on care, on respect for fact and principle. "Copy" will be edited in a different spirit; news will be handled after a different manner and ignorant or flippant and unscrupulous disciples of the journalistic fakers will find their occupation gone. There will be fewer complaints of misrepresentation and less disposition to ignore scornfully—as many educators and scientists have had to do—newspaper reports and newspaper comment.

The newspapers, even the worst of them, have done so much for moral and political reform, consciously and unconsciously, deliberately and unwittingly, that they might do something for their own elevation and improvement. If they should neglect or fail to mend their ways, to remedy the serious defects justly complained of by so many intelligent and right-minded men and women, the penalty—unavoidable in the long run—which threatens them is moral decline, contempt, and a place among the forces of disorder and evil. There can be no justice, sanity, due process of law, decency in modern society unless the great and influential newspapers, with their smaller imitators and disciples, apply and respect these fundamental virtues in reporting events and holding the mirror up to life and human affairs.